

Pope Benedict's 2008 Message for Lent
January 29, 2008 - By Benedict XVI

"Christ made Himself poor for you" (2 Corinthians 8, 9)

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Each year, Lent offers us a providential opportunity to deepen the meaning and value of our Christian lives, and it stimulates us to rediscover the mercy of God so that we, in turn, become more merciful toward our brothers and sisters. In the Lenten period, the Church makes it her duty to propose some specific tasks that accompany the faithful concretely in this process of interior renewal: these are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. For this year's Lenten Message, I wish to spend some time reflecting on the practice of almsgiving, which represents a specific way to assist those in need and, at the same time, an exercise in self-denial to free us from attachment to worldly goods. The force of attraction to material riches and just how categorical our decision must be not to make of them an idol, Jesus confirms in a resolute way: "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Lk 16,13). Almsgiving helps us to overcome this constant temptation, teaching us to respond to our neighbor's needs and to share with others whatever we possess through divine goodness. This is the aim of the special collections in favor of the poor, which are promoted during Lent in many parts of the world. In this way, inward cleansing is accompanied by a gesture of ecclesial communion, mirroring what already took place in the early Church. In his Letters, Saint Paul speaks of this in regard to the collection for the Jerusalem community (cf. 2 Cor 8-9; Rm 15, 25-27).

According to the teaching of the Gospel, we are not owners but rather administrators of the goods we possess: these, then, are not to be considered as our exclusive possession, but means through which the Lord calls each one of us to act as a steward of His providence for our neighbor. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, material goods bear a social value, according to the principle of their universal destination (cf. n. 2404)

In the Gospel, Jesus explicitly admonishes the one who possesses and uses earthly riches only for self. In the face of the multitudes, who, lacking everything, suffer hunger, the words of Saint John acquire the tone of a ringing rebuke: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" (1 Jn 3,17). In those countries whose population is majority Christian, the call to share is even more urgent, since their responsibility toward the many who suffer poverty and abandonment is even greater. To come to their aid is a duty of justice even prior to being an act of charity.

The Gospel highlights a typical feature of Christian almsgiving: it must be hidden: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," Jesus asserts, "so that your alms may be done in secret" (Mt 6,3-4). Just a short while before, He said not to boast of one's own good works so as not to risk being deprived of the heavenly reward (cf. Mt 6,1-2). The disciple is to be concerned with God's greater glory. Jesus warns: "In this way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5,16). Everything, then, must be done for God's glory and not our own. This understanding, dear brothers and sisters, must accompany every gesture of help to our neighbor, avoiding that it becomes a means to make ourselves the center of attention. If, in accomplishing a good deed, we do not have as our goal God's glory and the real well being of our brothers and sisters, looking rather for a return of personal interest or simply of applause, we place ourselves outside of the Gospel vision. In today's world of images, attentive vigilance is required, since this temptation is great. Almsgiving, according to the Gospel, is not mere philanthropy: rather it is a concrete expression of charity, a theological virtue that demands interior conversion to love of God and neighbor, in imitation of Jesus Christ, who, dying on the cross, gave His entire self for us. How could we not thank God for the many people who silently, far from the gaze of the media world, fulfill, with this spirit, generous actions in support of one's neighbor in difficulty? There is little use in giving one's personal goods to others if it leads to a heart puffed up in vainglory: for this reason, the one, who knows that God "sees in secret" and in secret will reward, does not seek human recognition for

works of mercy.

In inviting us to consider almsgiving with a more profound gaze that transcends the purely material dimension, Scripture teaches us that there is more joy in giving than in receiving (cf. Acts 20,35). When we do things out of love, we express the truth of our being; indeed, we have been created not for ourselves but for God and our brothers and sisters (cf. 2 Cor 5,15). Every time when, for love of God, we share our goods with our neighbor in need, we discover that the fullness of life comes from love and all is returned to us as a blessing in the form of peace, inner satisfaction and joy. Our Father in heaven rewards our almsgiving with His joy. What is more: Saint Peter includes among the spiritual fruits of almsgiving the forgiveness of sins: "Charity," he writes, "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4,8). As the Lenten liturgy frequently repeats, God offers to us sinners the possibility of being forgiven. The fact of sharing with the poor what we possess disposes us to receive such a gift. In this moment, my thought turns to those who realize the weight of the evil they have committed and, precisely for this reason, feel far from God, fearful and almost incapable of turning to Him. By drawing close to others through almsgiving, we draw close to God; it can become an instrument for authentic conversion and reconciliation with Him and our brothers.

Almsgiving teaches us the generosity of love. Saint Joseph Benedict Cottolengo forthrightly recommends: "Never keep an account of the coins you give, since this is what I always say: if, in giving alms, the left hand is not to know what the right hand is doing, then the right hand, too, should not know what it does itself" (Detti e pensieri, Edilibri, n. 201). In this regard, all the more significant is the Gospel story of the widow who, out of her poverty, cast into the Temple treasury "all she had to live on" (Mk 12,44). Her tiny and insignificant coin becomes an eloquent symbol: this widow gives to God not out of her abundance, not so much what she has, but what she is. Her entire self.

We find this moving passage inserted in the description of the days that immediately precede Jesus' passion and death, who, as Saint Paul writes, made Himself poor to enrich us out of His poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8,9); He gave His entire self for us. Lent, also through the practice of almsgiving, inspires us to follow His example. In His school, we can learn to make of our lives a total gift; imitating Him, we are able to make ourselves available, not so much in giving a part of what we possess, but our very selves. Cannot the entire Gospel be summarized perhaps in the one commandment of love? The Lenten practice of almsgiving thus becomes a means to deepen our Christian vocation. In gratuitously offering himself, the Christian bears witness that it is love and not material richness that determines the laws of his existence. Love, then, gives almsgiving its value; it inspires various forms of giving, according to the possibilities and conditions of each person.

Dear brothers and sisters, Lent invites us to "train ourselves" spiritually, also through the practice of almsgiving, in order to grow in charity and recognize in the poor Christ Himself. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the Apostle Peter said to the cripple who was begging alms at the Temple gate: "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk" (Acts 3,6). In giving alms, we offer something material, a sign of the greater gift that we can impart to others through the announcement and witness of Christ, in whose name is found true life. Let this time, then, be marked by a personal and community effort of attachment to Christ in order that we may be witnesses of His love. May Mary, Mother and faithful Servant of the Lord, help believers to enter the "spiritual battle" of Lent, armed with prayer, fasting and the practice of almsgiving, so as to arrive at the celebration of the Easter Feasts, renewed in spirit. With these wishes, I willingly impart to all my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 30 October 2007

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